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Soviet Brigade: How the U.S. Traced It

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 12 — The United States Government received indications of the presence of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba through overhearing the Russian word "brigada" in radio monitoring in 1975 and 1976, intelligence officials said this week.

A year ago, the Carter Administration received information, this time more specific, from radio interceptions, that a Soviet combat force designated as a brigade was garrisoned in Cuba, but it did not pursue the matter, the intelligence officials said.

It was not until the Carter Administration began to worry last spring about Cuban military involvement, through training and arms supplies, in the Nicaraguan revolution and in insurgencies in Grenada and El Salvador that it called upon the intelligence agencies to examine the Soviet military role in Cuba more closely.

How Dispute Developed

In interviews over the last week with officials in the White House, Defense and State Departments, the Central Intelligence Agency and Congress, the emergence of the Soviet brigade as an intelligence problem and a political issue developed in this way:

Surveillance, stepped up in March and April, was intensified again in July and still again in August, ultimately producing what intelligence officials called "confirmatory evidence" — a chance reference in a monitored Russian radio message to a "maneuver" by the "brigade" scheduled for Aug. 17.

On that day, a camera satellite orbiting high over Cuba trained a powerful lens on a small area a few miles southwest of Havana and "sure enough," an intelligence officer recalled, "there was the brigade on maneuver with tanks, personnel carriers and mechanized infantry."

The radio signal had been a Soviet request to the Cuban Army for permission to use the San Pedro maneuver grounds, a few miles west of Havana's José Martí International Airport, to exercise the "brigade" composed of a rocket battalion, a tank battalion and two infantry battalions — totaling 2,300 to 3,800 men.

Well-Camouflaged Area

San Pedro is several miles west of a large Soviet military complex where there is a well-camouflaged storage area as well as a headquarters commanded by a Soviet major general. The mile-square complex, called Lourdes, also includes large dish-shaped radar receiver terminals at a site called Torrens for intercepting communications from American missile tests and from satellites.

On Aug. 20, three days later, other American satellite photographs showed San Pedro empty and military equipment being stowed away at Lourdes. The troops and officers, it was determined, were garrisoned at two military camps nearby — the larger part eight miles east of Lourdes at Santiago de las Vegas, and the smaller one 11 miles to the east at Managua.

However, what began as a rather routine intelligence collection exercise has become a political issue centered on demands for linking the removal of the Soviet troops and approval of the nuclear arms treaty. Other aspects of the dispute involve United States prestige in the hemisphere, Soviet behavior in the overall East-West relationship and the question whether there was an "intelligence failure."

Despite intense concentration in recent weeks by intelligence officials and policy makers, and searching inquiries posed through diplomatic channels to the Soviet Union, many questions remain unresolved.

The Mysteries Remain

Among the mysteries is how long the Soviet brigade has been stationed in Cuba and what its mission is. Last week the Soviet Embassy advised the State Department that a Soviet military advisory group had been in Cuba since 1962, had not changed in size or role and was the only Soviet military formation on the island. This has prompted some American analysts to wonder whether the advisory group has a double mission of training Cubans and forming up as a combat unit on occasion.

As for the suburban Havana facilities at Lourdes, Santiago de las Vegas and Managua, a senior intelligence official said, "We've known about those installations near Havana for years and have changed through the years."

Last week in an interview, Maj. Gen. George J. Keegan, a former Air Force intelligence chief, recalled having seen reports about the Soviet combat force "five or six years ago," but added that at the time he and other Pentagon officials were unable to persuade the State Department or the Central Intelligence Agency to focus attention on it. "We sort of forgot about it," he said.

Last week both former President Gerald R. Ford and his Secretary of State, Henry A. Kissinger, issued statements asserting that they had never seen intelligence reports indicating the presence of a Soviet combat force in Cuba in their time in office, which ended in 1976. According to intelligence officials, the bits and pieces of information assembled on the brigade in earlier years never were submitted to higher levels of the intelligence community, much less to policy makers.

One of the problems appears to have been semantic, since American military specialists repeatedly pointed out that a "brigade" was an abnormality in the Soviet Army and, as one remarked: "We said what should not be can not be."

A Demonstration Brigade?

Now some of the American intelligence experts have begun to speculate that the brigade's primary mission was to demonstrate combat techniques in the brigade configuration of rocket, tank and infantry units used by the Cuban forces in Africa in recent years.

Somewhat parallel to this surmise is the idea that the Soviet unit may well have been in place for more than a decade, but that its "mission changed in the 1970's," as a Defense Department official put it, possibly in support of Soviet utilization of Cuban troops as proxy forces to reinforce leftist governments in Angola, Ethiopia and Southern Yemen.

The intelligence officials are still sifting the mass of signal interceptions, photographs and a few reports from the handful of American agents still available in Cuba, which they have accumulated about the Soviet command structure on the island.

They say there are also looking into files, much of them stored in computers, in an effort to trace the brigade's origins and to determine whether it was separate from the advisory group left over from the 1962 missile crisis. It is a classic intelligence operation in which old pieces of information that had no meaning when they first came to light suddenly acquire significance and help from a pattern of activity that makes sense. "But we still don't know how far back it goes and we're still not sure of all our facts," a top-ranking intelligence official said.

The intelligence officials, from the C.I.A., Defense Department and White House, have struck a defensive note in reviewing the actions that finally led to the discovery of the brigade. They contend on the one hand that they still do not consider it militarily significant and on the other hand that, until recently, they had been too busy concentrating limited technical surveillance resources on other more crucial targets to accumulate adequate information on the Soviet troops in Cuba.

These arguments were carried into hearings begun today by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on whether there was, as some of the panel members asserted last week, "an intelligence failure" surrounding the discovery of the Soviet troops.

"I think our people are very pleased," one Administration official said of the intelligence performance. "It was a team effort."